



EXECUTIVE COMPUTING

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PC program misrepresents performance

The headline in the advertisement for a new personal computer program called *Lightning* (not to be confused with "Turbo Lightning," previously reviewed in this column) reads, "Cuts disk access time in half — makes your IBM PC lightning fast — \$49.95."

The ad goes on to proclaim, "Every program that accesses the disk (hard disk or floppy), is made instantly faster — 2 to 4 times faster." The advertisement has appeared in prominent computer publications, and has (judging from the frequency and large size of the ad) generated thousands of orders for the publisher, Personal Computer Support Group of Dallas.

Here is a program that, once loaded into your computer's memory, is said to speed up just about every other program you run, without the use of add-in circuit boards that are typically necessary to increase performance.

Clear misrepresentation

It sounded too good to be true. As it turned out, it was. After obtaining a copy of the program and testing it out, I was appalled to discover what could be called "major differences" between stated claims and actual performance. Here are the test results:

✓ It took precisely 3 minutes and 11 seconds to perform a disk-intensive search of a large data base (using the Condor data base with 13,059 client records on a hard disk), before installing the Lightning program. After installing Lightning and rerunning the same operation, it then took exactly 3 minutes and 11 seconds! Absolutely no improvement was experienced.

✓ When outputting records from another data base on a hard disk (using the unload function of PowerBase with a 601 record file), before installing the Lightning program, it took 3 minutes, 58 seconds. After installing Lightning and rerunning the operation, it took 3 minutes, 58 seconds. Again, no improvement.

✓ Since the manual suggested that performance might be improved by changing the "buffer" size used by the program, I reran both tests accordingly. Again, no change.

At this point, I called the developer of the program and found out the following:

✓ Since it takes more time for your computer to access data on your disk than it does to access data stored in memory, the key to Lightning's operation is an algorithm that determines which data to place in memory.

✓ The program works by establishing a "buffer" in memory, and by first reading frequently accessed data from your disk into this area. Then, whenever your application program (data base, word processing or other type of program) normally accesses the disk, it checks the buffer and accesses the data from there — *if it is there*. That's the catch. If the data being sought is not in the buffer, then no speed improvement occurs. As it happened, in both common operations I tried, the data being sought was either not put in memory by the Lightning program or not accessed efficiently.

✓ Some operations are speeded up, but only if you have recently done a related operation that placed the data in memory. Indeed, when performing another kind of operation, such as selecting certain records in a data base using an index, the developer showed me how to improve performance from 23 seconds to 19 seconds on the first pass and 11 seconds thereafter. Clearly this occasional time gain still does not square with the ad claims.

The company responds

At this point, I talked with the owners of the company that markets the program and placed the ads. I shared with them the results of my tests and asked for their response.

At first, they expressed surprise, and said almost all feedback from their customers had been positive. They said they give refunds to anyone unhappy with the program.

Then, to their credit, they admitted that the ads are not accurate, and agreed to withdraw them immediately. For the record, here's exactly what they said: "You've found a glaring error in the ad, and we agree that it's misleading the way it's currently worded. It will be changed. We'll also mention our refund policy in future advertisements."

Is this enough? Perhaps not. It may be too much to expect, but since the refund policy was not included in the original ad, I think it would be appropriate if they sent an explanatory letter to previous buyers, offering refunds.

A learning experience

Unfortunately, experiences such as this are not unique in the computer industry. With thousands of products competing for the buyer's attention, the software publishers and ad copywriters often get carried away when describing their products — sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. The test of this company's real intentions will be their actions now that we've called their bluff.

As buyers, this experience teaches not to trust the advertisements. And it reinforces my slogan, "It's smart to learn from your mistakes, but it's even smarter to learn from the mistakes of others."

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